Bruce Catton. Reflections on the Civil War

"What did it do for us, what did it accomplish? Was it simply a waste, a needless, violent episode that broke our country apart? Was it something that should have been avoided or did we get something out of it? I suppose it took me a long time to fumble my way through questions like those, but I finally did come to the conclusion, and I grow stronger in it every day, that the war was worthwhile, that it did accomplish something. It gave us a political unity in the sense that it kept the country from fragmenting into a number of separate, independent nations. The North American continent was not Balkanized; the geographic unit that made possible the wealth and the prosperity of later days was preserved. Beyond that, the country made a commitment during that war; a commitment to a broader freedom, a broader citizenship. We can no longer be content with anything less that complete liberty, complete equality before law for all of our people regardless of their color, their race, their religion, their national origins; regardless of anything. We all have to fare alike. We are fated to continue the experiment in peaceful democracy, and I don't think any people were ever committed to a nobler experiment than that one.

So I can't help feeling that the war was worth its cost. We have not yet reached the goal we set ourselves at the time, and I'm not sure we ever will be satisfied with our progress. But at least we keep going. We have to continue on the path that was laid out for us at Appomattox, and it is a very good path for any people to follow."

James McPherson: Drawn With the Sword:

Americans just can't get enough of the Civil War. Why?

The human cost of the Civil War was for Americans by far the most devastating in our history. The toll, when you add the unknown but probably substantial number of civilian deaths, probably exceeds that of all other American wars put together. Antietam, America's single bloodiest day, had 23,000 casualties - 4 times the number of American casualties on D-Day, 1944. The 6,300 killed/wounded in one day nearly doubles the number of Americans killed/wounded in all the rest of the country's 19th century wars combined: War of 1812, Mexican War, Spanish-American War, the Indian Wars. 2% of the American population died in the CW; today, that would be 5 million (pages 55-6).

This consciousness of the Civil War, of the past as part of the present, continues to be more intense in the South than elsewhere. William Faulkner: “the past is never dead.  It’s not even past.” As any reader of Faulkner's novels knows, the Civil War is central to that past that is present; it is the great watershed of Southern history; it is, as Mark Twain put it, "what A.D. is elsewhere; they {the South} date from it" (Life on the Mississippi, 262). The symbols of that past-in-present surround Southerners as they grow up, from the Robert E. Lee Elementary School or Jefferson Davis High School they attend and the Confederate battle flag that flies over their statehouse to the Confederate soldier enshrined in bronze or granite on the town square and the family folklore about victimization by Sherman's bummers. Some of those symbols remain highly controversial and provoke as much passion today as in 1863: the song Dixie, for example, and the Confederate battle flag, which for many Southern whites continue to represent courage, honor, or defiance while to blacks they represent racism and oppression.

These symbols and the controversy they arouse suggest the most important reason for the enduring fascination with the Civil War: Great issues were at stake, issues about which Americans were willing to fight and die; issues whose resolution profoundly transformed and redefined the United States but at the same time are still alive and contested today (pages 58-9).

Northern victory in the Civil War resolved two fundamental, festering issues left unresolved by the Revolution of 1776: whether this fragile republican experiment called the United States would survive, and whether the house divided would continue to endure half slave and half free. Both of these issues remained open questions until 1865. Many Americans had doubted whether the republic would survive; many European conservatives had predicted its demise; some Americans advocated the right of secession and periodically threatened to invoke it; eleven states did invoke it in 1860 and 1861. But since 1865 no state or region has seriously threatened secession, not even during the "massive resistance" to desegregation from 1954 to 1964. Even before 1865 the United States, land of liberty, was the largest slaveholding country in the world. Since 1865 that particular "monstrous injustice" and "hypocrisy" has existed no more. (page 63)

The old decentralized republic, in which the post office was the only agency of national government that touched the average citizen, was transformed by the crucible of war into a centralized polity that taxed people directly and created an internal revenue bureau to collect the taxes, expanded the jurisdiction of federal courts, created a national currency and a federally chartered banking system, drafted men into the army, and created the Freedman's Bureau as the first national agency for social welfare. Eleven of the first twelve amendments to the Constitution had limited the powers of the national government; six of the next seven, starting with the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865, radically expanded those powers at the expense of the states. The first three of these amendments converted four million slaves into citizens and voters within five years, the most rapid and fundamental social transformation in American history.

From 1789 to 1861 a Southern slaveholder was president of the United States two-thirds of the time, and two-thirds of the speakers of the House and presidents pro tem of the Senate had also been Southerners. Twenty of the thirty-five Supreme Court justices appointed during that half of the century were Southerners. The institutions and ideology of a plantation society and a caste system that had dominated half of the country before 1861 and sought to dominate more went down with a great crash in 1865 and were replaced by the institutions and ideology of free-labor entrepreneurial capitalism. For better or for worse, the flames of Civil War forged the framework of modern America.

So even if the veneer of romance and myth that has attracted so many of the current Civil War camp followers were stripped away, leaving only the trauma of violence and suffering, the Civil War would remain the most dramatic and crucial experience in American history. That fact will ensure the persistence of its popularity and its importance as an historical subject so long as there is a United States. (pages 64-5)

Robert Penn Warren said the Civil War was, "for the American imagination, the greatest single event of our history" (Legacies of the Civil War). Bernard DeVoto said, "...the Civil War is the crux of our history" ("The Easy Chair"). Shelby Foote says the Civil War defined us and shaped our national character (interview with Geoffrey Ward).